

***The Song of Songs: Riddle of Riddles*, by Yair Zakovitch.
Translated and edited by Valerie Carr Zakovitch**

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In this review, “book” refers to the book under review as against the “Song”, the biblical book which is the subject of the reviewed book.

The front matter covers (a table of) Contents and a Translator’s Note. This is followed by an Introduction, eight chapters, a one-page List of Abbreviations, an Index of Subjects comprising five pages and an Index of References to biblical and post-biblical texts. The biblical references include 33 of the 39 books of the Hebrew Bible and a single reference to the book of John in the New Testament, while the post-biblical references include four books from the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, the Mishnah, the Tosefta, the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmudim, some Midrashim, the Tanhuma Buber, the Tanhuma and two ancient authors.

The first and the last chapters are about overarching views of the Song; the other chapters are commentaries and exegeses of certain poems in the Song (from one verse in Chapter 2 to the seven verses in Chapter 5 of the book), with the exception of the second last chapter where a poem from the book of Proverbs has been analysed and presented as critique on the Song, even when it appears before the Song in all biblical canons.

At least three fundamental assumptions underlie the book: first, that the books of the Hebrew Bible draw from poetic traditions which had certain characteristics (Chapter 1); secondly, that intertextual parallels in the Hebrew Bible necessarily imply dependence of narratives on earlier poetry or at least a common source for a biblical narrative and a poem; and thirdly, that the Song is an anthology of riddles, each having several possible solutions.

The first two assumptions are based on a specific, sometimes questionable, dating or alleged insertion of the relevant text. In addition, even if the wording has been drawn from previously existing poetry, this does not make the historicity of a claim, such as that in 1 Kings 11:3, necessarily fictitious, which seems to be an assertion in Chapter 2.

The second assumption leads to the justification of allegorical interpretations in the last chapter but is then merely based on similarities between texts. Some of these similarities seem, however, rather coincidental or forced, especially when it is limited to a single parallel, such as in the alleged use of the Song in the book of John, as asserted on p. 105.

The third assumption is not convincing either, unless a rather broad definition or a metaphorical meaning of “riddle” is accepted. Nowhere is the Hebrew word חֵדָּה (‘riddle’) used in the Song as it occurs elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, nor does the Song itself suggest that a riddle is intended. Furthermore, claiming a superlative for these riddles (“riddle of riddles” in the book’s title, but actually anchored in Chapter 3) seems an exaggeration intended to match the superlative in the title of the Song. That certain verses are difficult to interpret or seem to have more than one meaning does not necessarily render them riddles.

Related to this are the claims to humour (e.g., p. 87) allegedly being expressed by certain poems in the Song. This is a risky statement, as the cultural distance—and therefore difference—between the Song and the author is not to be underestimated.

Other assumptions about the implied emotional meaning of certain utterances by the protagonists (e.g., p. 78) are left unjustified and appear to have been based merely on personal intuition rather than on scientific psychology. However, the psychological dimension of the Song remains an important aspect that has at least been given attention in this commentary. Especially the origin of riddles in the labyrinths of the unconscious, as hinted at in Chapter 3, invites a further psychoanalytical exploration of the possibilities in this book. Another important psychological assumption concerns dreams and day-dreams although without a clear definition of how these are to be identified and recognised over against utterances by the protagonists anchored in reality. In fact, some of the “conclusions” (cf. e.g., “conclude” on p. 29) remain assumptions.

Only the Introduction and chapters 1, 5 and 8 have not been published in some version before. Much of the material is furthermore based on two commentaries previously published by the author. This means that less than half of the book is new and that most of the sources referred to are dated.

Amongst the new contributions is Chapter 5, the longest, and arguably the best. It is the only chapter that is well contextualised in cultural-historical considerations.

Although the index at the end shows that all the verses of the Song have been referred to, most of the text of the Song has, in fact, been dealt with in a thorough way, sometimes

by highlighting intertextuality within the Song as well. This means that the book has woven a rich tapestry of related themes, even when the chapters have originally been separate contributions, mirroring something of the Song itself as well.

As a translation the book is not completely successful, as certain English expressions betray a non-native user of the language. In other instances, some sentences do not make sense, partly because a clear logic is lacking. Furthermore, the plural of the Arabic *waṣf* ('description') is not *waṣf*s (as stated on p. 53, for instance), but *auṣāf* (أوصاف).

The book is valuable as it suggests a plurality of alternative interpretations, even when some are not always convincing.